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**LEARNING TO PARTICIPATE
THE EXPERIENCE OF MST IN BRAZIL**

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LEARNING TO PARTICIPATE: THE MST EXPERIENCE IN BRAZIL

by
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***Quando eu morrer
Cansado de guerra,
Morro de bem
Com a minha terra.***

Chico Buarque -Assentado

In contemporary Brazil, the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*/MST is one of the most combative forces. The MST emerged on 1979, during the military dictatorship. Their first land occupation in *Encruzilhada Natalino*, Rio Grande do Sul, was supported by church organizations, political parties and workers' trade unions. The movement spread all over the country as land reform was included in the political agenda during the redemocratization days of the mid-1980s¹. Recent facts show that landless have become a powerful social actor. Despite violence and attempts at co-optation, they promote mobilizations to occupy unproductive properties and public buildings. Land occupations increased from 43 (1990) to 180 (1997), totaling 698 in these years.

The MST's beliefs have already become integrated in a popular movement, which has thousands of activists fighting for land with a revolutionary passion. Cooperative relations, collective planning and self-management characterize their rural settlements. Among some of them is emerging a newly developed consciousness of socially owned property of the means of production. They have established a monthly newspaper to communicate their ideas; an educational system based on the "work & study" methodology; and an intense political-ideological formation through study groups of radical theory. Their leaders appear on the media, negotiate with the government and join the urban organizations. Solidarity, social justice and autonomy are fundamental ethical values in the landless' daily life. Their actions are helping to consolidate an alliance to unify the struggle for a better society.

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This complex experience raises an essential question to the debate on social change: What is participation? Participation to the MST has been a social practice, a pedagogic procedure, and a political act. For the landless men, women, young people and children, this learning process:

1. begins with massive and continuous land occupations;
2. flourishes in the collective way of working and living in the occupations and settlements;
3. strengthens through the educational activities conceived and exercised in the schools and the brigades;
4. expands in the construction of an alternative project for all Brazilians.

To examine this issue, my purpose is to analyze, after a brief presentation of the concept of land reform, the MST participatory experience focusing on these four elements that make up an integrated whole.

LAND REFORM

Land reform is a contradictory process of transforming production and power relations that depends, in its formulation and implementation, on the correlation of political forces and the specific course of class struggle (Martins, 1994). The present concept reinforces the links between economic, political and ideological conditions, as opposed to current views in Brazilian society that land reform is either an economic issue or a social policy, or simply an ideological problem. The character of land reform should be discussed in the context of a new proposal emerging from the hands and minds of thousands of *acampados* and settlers; a proposal antagonistic to the ruling classes' agrarian project.

The political-ideological polarization between the MST and the *Uniao Democratica Ruralista/UDR* (landowners' organization)², particularly during the elaboration of the First National Plan of Land Reform in 1985 and the 1988 Constitutional Assembly, led to the construction of two different models of land reform. They express the capital-labor force confrontation. A central issue is the decision concerning the ownership of the means of production (individual or collective) and the process of wealth distribution (private capital accumulation or social capital accumulation, and the development of productive forces).³

The UDR's proposal relies on individual interests and private property. To the extent that the bourgeoisie accepts redistribution, it must be through the parceling of the land in small units after its legal dispossession occurs. The "model of private appropriation" is similar to the classical capitalistic agrarian reform that intends to promote agricultural modernization under agroindustries' control of the settlers' production.

The MST's "model of social appropriation" is based on cooperative relations among direct workers. Their project of collective occupation and production, through alternative patterns of land appropriation and use as well as through participatory planning and management in the settlements, clarifies the antagonistic class interests. This radical proposal is not simply land redistribution to incorporate more farmers into the capitalist system, but involves shifting the entire agrarian structure: production, power and cultural relations.

OCCUPYING THE LAND

The MST developed an efficient strategy of pressure on the *Instituto Nacional de Colonizaco e Reforma Agraria/INCRA*⁴, a state institution: massive and continuous land occupations. This strategy has also been effective in revealing agrarian concentration, the cause of most of the present social problems. The occupation process, called *a festa* (the "party") by the movement, has a special meaning to the landless themselves.

The decision to settle on and seize a private property, not an easy one, requires maturity, cohesion, discipline and hope. This direct action turns "passive" peasants into powerful actors fighting for land and political participation. They now name themselves "free workers". They rescue their capacity as creators of material and cultural commodities, denied either in the "traditional" latifundium or in the "modern" agribusiness complex, where they were "workers for the capital".

The MST threatens the ruling classes that react with violence, as well as arguing that the occupations are illegal. According to them, land seizures are leading to a situation of breakdown of authority in Brazilian society. To maintain public order, the state representatives respond to what is considered an evident "sabotage of democratic institutions", by prosecuting the MST leaders.

What is being challenged by these radical actions? Basically private property rights guaranteed by bourgeois law, one of the values of the capitalist order, that continues to be reinforced by the neo-liberal discourse. These actions also challenge President Fernando Henrique Cardoso⁵, both in his political performance on the national scene, and in terms of the government's commitments to structural adjustments imposed by the World Bank and the IMF, in the international arena.

The World Bank proposed "Market-assisted land reform" in 1995, as a solution for unstable politically developing countries, like South Africa and Colombia. However, Brazil was included once the intensity of land occupations and the radicalization of conflicts were considered a "danger" to the regime, according to the Bank's appraisal.⁶ Despite the efforts to privatize land reform by

the World Bank and the Brazilian government, the struggle goes on! Occupation and production are both part of the MST's strategy against neo-liberalism.

COLLECTIVE WORKING AND LIVING

The settlement is conceived of as a whole economic unit and not only a legal property. Production and management have been crucial activities to the success of the MST's proposal: agricultural cooperation (MST, 1993). In their own words, *cooperation is the way to gather or sum the efforts of each individual worker to do things in common, buying machines and tools, raising cattle, sharing the land*. To settlers planning implies democratic decisions concerning production, marketing, education, health care, political organization, culture, etc. But this is not a simple task, especially if hundreds of persons are involved.

Through democratic structures of decision making the settlements can be organized varying in form from family basis to collective possession, depending on the workers experience, the quality of the soil, the kind of crops, the market structure and many other factors. For instance, the property can be individually owned but the work and the production done collectively; or on part of the land, work and production can be individual and on another part, collective; or all the property can be collective but the families work on part of the land to produce for their own use.

During their frequent assemblies, the family members participate in many ways: giving proposals, asking questions, discussing, deciding, and singing⁷. Normally, the agenda is known in advance and some methodological tools are used to improve participation. Most women and teenagers speak independently as *companheiras de luta*. In some of the settlements, the married member is accepted only when the couple joins the organization. There is an ordinaire assembly in which the annual balance is presented and the distribution of profit - in machines' repair, soil improvement, cattle feeding, computers, house building, teachers' salary, child care, mobilization and so on - has to be approved by the majority of the assistants.

A growing percentage of settlers' monetary income are not divided but used in a collective way to maintain the existing means of production, for new investments or for educational, health and technological assistance to their families. These different kind of *fundos* (reserves) provide some evidence that an experience of socialized capital accumulation is going on.

The MST's cooperative structure emphasizes social needs and political results as much as economic returns to the settlers. Credit, marketing support and technical assistance are services offered by the cooperatives to increase agricultural activities, profitability and living standards. The *Confederacao das*

Cooperativas de Reforma Agraria do Brasil (CONCRAB) has come to be an instrument to establish solid relationships among producers and consumers, to show the relevance of land reform to the urban population, and to guarantee relative financial autonomy.

The participatory planning is influenced by the previous experiences of the families, the regional and ecological diversities, and the access to the material conditions of production such as capital, technology and the labor-force training. The results can be quite different and there is a heterogeneity of situations in the settlements (Medeiros, 1994).

The concept of collective working and living is the core of the MST strategy to develop sustainable actions of resistance in the settlements. It is well-known that once the land is appropriated, a period of demobilization may occur. Peasants who fought for a place to live and work, now could be seduced by the supposed benefits of “free-market” capitalism. To the extent that this is true, confrontation also takes place in the subjective field of battle.

CREATING A NEW MAN AND A NEW WOMAN

Education to eliminate not only illiteracy but also political misinformation and the technological gap is a priority in MST’s experience. In a general sense, as Paulo Freire said a *settlement, precisely because it is a production unit (there is no production outside the man-world relation) should also be a whole pedagogic unit* (1983: 58). To respond to the challenges posed by their proposal of land reform, the concept of education has been unfolded far beyond the formal system. Educational activities involve the settlers choosing their own teachers, changing subjects and methodologies of the regular public educational system, organizing brigades for the political-ideological formation of their activists, and coordinating training courses for entrepreneurial and technological improvements.

Their basic pedagogic principles are: (1) the “work & study” methodology putting together the two terms of the modern dichotomy study or work; (2) the management of the learning process by teachers and students with the formulation of democratic rules in the schools, training centers and brigades; and (3) the relation practice-theory-practice. The educational practice has been to incorporate the lessons learned from the struggle for land, production and cooperation which in turn benefit from a more theoretical formation of organizers, leaders, and teachers.

The MST’s two-year school that prepares second level technicians in agricultural cooperation was recently accredited by the Ministry of Education. And in 1995 the movement won the UNICEF’s award for the quality of its

education and participation program developed in 600 elementary schools and 20 high schools, totaling 35.000 students and 1.400 teachers.

As urgent as to democratize the access to education is to qualify the rural workers through massive methodologies due to the impressive number of the MST's participants, almost 500.000. The *Instituto de Capacitacao Tecnica e Pesquisa da Reforma Agraria* (ITERRA) articulates workshops in agribusiness, organizational laboratories for management of financial and human resources, and extensive courses that integrate formation and production. Although the MST believes that economic power is fundamental to achieving political power, most of their efforts are aimed at "creating a new man and a new woman for a new society".

THE ALTERNATIVE PROJECT

The conception of the Popular Project, as democratic and participatory planning, comes from the day-to-day practices in the occupations and settlements, as well as from the study of other peoples' historical experiences in the schools and the brigades. The contribution of the MST's *amigos* - teachers, politicians, technicians, students, priests, etc - is organized in a network to support the several groups that meet regularly to work out the suggestions coming from the base and returning to the base.

The strategy has been to make a *consulta popular*, mobilizing the population and, at the same time, stimulating them to participate in the formulation of economic, social and cultural policies. To provoke a broader debate, the MST led a march to denounce the Cardoso administration, which was *transferring peoples' wealth, through privatization, to the powerful Brazilians* and to insist on their new idea: the construction of a *truly democratic society with social justice, income distribution and solidarity* (MST's pamphlet, August 24, 1998). From August 3rd to September 7th of 1998, Brazil Independence Day, almost 6.000 workers marched throughout the country discussing, in hundreds of small and big cities, themes like employment, health care, education, housing, culture, food, etc.

The increase of land occupations, the denouncing of the official agrarian reform data as false, and the campaign in favor of Luis Inacio da Silva (Lula)⁸, were important points in the MST's 1998 agenda. Nevertheless, the emphasis has been on the elaboration of a national alternative project. The immediate challenge is to demonstrate to Brazilian population that their day-to-day problems are a consequence of the neoliberal policies.

Although the Popular Project deals with a complexity of problems, an important component is land reform but a very different one from the capitalistic

proposal. In MST political practice, "land reform for all" is a key element to unify Brazilian workers - urban and rural, manual and intellectual - in their struggle for a better society.

The alternative project, involving mass, direct, radical, continuous and sustainable actions of resistance, has to be elaborated in a base-oriented process that respects the social heritage, conceives of alternatives for the majority, presents ideas in a simple and convincing way, transforms ideas into projects for structural change, and makes people understand and fight for them.

CONCLUSION

The MST participatory practice is being closely observed by the landless themselves and by Brazilians in general as an embryo of a new society which will come to life through the efforts of the popular sectors. Brazil certainly needs land reform in the context of changing the whole model of development. The emerging land reform sector has a central role in the economic, social, political and cultural changes. This experience of workers' participation does not fit into the neo-liberal project and the next steps are to mobilize forces. The MST appears to have the capacity to transform the collective dream of millions of Brazilians that want a better life into radical actions. It remains to be seen whether it will do so.

NOTES

¹ There is a large literature on the significance and the viability of Brazilian land reform in that period. Particularly important are the works that reflect the debate among intellectuals and worker leaders (CONTAG, 1982; Carvalho, 1982; Figueredo, 1984; Graziano Silva, 1985; CNRA, 1987; Dreifuss 1989). During the so-called *Nova Republica*, a national campaign was organized to coordinate the popular mobilizations.

² The UDR is the rural entrepreneurs organization created in 1986 (Bruni, 1987). Due to the violence of their actions, hiring *pistoleiros* (killers) and maintaining a private army to defend their properties, the UDR lost political support in the nineties. Their leader, Ronaldo Caiado, had a weak performance as a candidate in the 1990 presidential election.

³ A theoretical approach to the two models of land reform is developed in Martins (1997: 57-71).

⁴ The INCRA, by the 1964 land law, is the responsible federal institution for private properties' dispossession through payment either in cash or public titles. *Desapropriacao* (dispossession) means that the owner will be compensated for the land and *expropriacao* (expropriation) means that the land will be incorporated as a public property without payment.

⁵ Fernando Henrique Cardoso, from the Social-Democratic Party (PSDB), is the Brazilian president since 1994 and was re-elected in 1998.

⁶ The document *Market-Assisted Land Reform* was discussed in the 1995 Agriculture Conference of the World Bank. It states that *the lack of land distribution generates an unstable political situation, with rural unemployment, civil disorders and armed violence in many developing countries, including Brazil.*

⁷ The meeting starts and ends with the MST hymn and popular songs about the struggle for land, the alliance with the proletariat, the women's participation. One of the most famous says *Pra mudar a sociedade do jeito que a gente quer, participando sem medo de ser mulher*. Sometimes they dramatize or draw "pictures of life" before making decisions. And prefer to use seeds to approve statutes or elect representatives rather than raising their hands.

⁸ Lula was the candidate of the Workers Party (PT) and the principal contender with Fernando Henrique Cardoso in the presidential elections of October 1998.